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INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BENSON FOR AEROSPACE AMERICAN
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Benson: The President's national security strategy has given a much broader definition to national security, including the promotion of prosperity at home and democracy abroad, along with the traditional defense activities. What implications does the new strategy have for DoD? And does it mean that more of DoD's resources will be diverted from its normal warfighting capability?

Perry: I tend to think of the military strategy as divided to deal with three different kinds of contingencies. The first of those is when dealing with vital national security interests. Those are interests in which our survival in the United States or its allies are at stake. For decades, the vital national security interest was, of course, deterring the Cold War--being prepared to fight a war with the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact.

Today the vital national security interests are different from that, but I would say first on the list is still with Russia. While Russia is a friend, it still has, perhaps, 25,000 nuclear weapons and a very negative turn in the government there... If there would be a negative turn--if it would develop into a government hostile to the West and to the United States--then those weapons would allow it to threaten the survival of the United States. Therefore, we continue to be very much concerned about developments in Russia. Part of our military strategy is organized around doing what we can to prevent a negative turn in Russia.

The second example of vital national security is Korea. With a one million man army and a threatened nuclear program, they tend to threaten survival of an ally--South Korea. So we have a vigorous program underway to try to stop the development of that nuclear program. And we have maintained a deterrence--conventional deterrence--from a conventional attack in Korea.

A third example of a vital national security interest is the Middle East, where because we are concerned about the survival of Israel, we're concerned about the Gulf oil, we're concerned about the nuclear weapons that some of the nations in that area are developing, [and] we also have a vital national interest. We have, of course, fought a war there in the last five years in defense of those issues.

So part of our military strategy, then, is directed to protecting these vital national security interests. The protection of those involve, as it did during the Cold War, first of all trying to deter war from happening through a projection of military threat; and secondly, being prepared to fight in a war if we would have to do that. Our military strategy, then, is more organized around providing that deterrence and providing the capability to fight if we have to.

We have other national interests besides these vital national interests, and we see that manifested in many places in the world today where we're not prepared to fight a war. But we're prepared to exert military, what I call coercive diplomacy, which involves the threat of the use of military forces. Perhaps Bosnia is the best example of that today. We have important (inaudible), I would say the most outstanding of which is preventing the spread of that war outside of Bosnia. In the furtherance of those interests we are using coercive diplomacy--we are threatening to use military force. We have, indeed, used it in conjunction with NATO on a few occasions, but very selectively and with no intention of starting a war.

This use of military force in Bosnia, I think, has confused people because they tend to think about it in terms of a war. But we're not fighting a war. We're using a very selective form of military power to fight pressure--to try to achieve a political objective.

Finally, we're using our military forces, but not military force, for humanitarian purposes. We're using them in Rwanda; we're using them in Bosnia also--the airlifts, the air drops into Bosnia for humanitarian purposes--but it does involve very substantial use of military forces. Our military strategy has to be organized around providing the resources and providing the capability to do those things as well. So, if you look at the three different dimensions of the need for military forces, you organize and prepare to meet those needs in very different ways and you think about them in very different ways.

Q: Former Secretary Cheney said the President's proposed cuts--he thought--were dangerous. And while the U.S. could still win a Gulf War with our present capability, we could not do it as effectively, could not deploy as rapidly, the conflict would last longer, and there would be more casualties. How do you respond to those remarks? They were made last year, by the way, not any time recently.

A: Well, I don't agree with them, but I would point out specifically that at the time Secretary Cheney made those remarks last year the size of our military forces was the same size as he had projected them to be at that time. So the drawdown in military forces was started, as you well know, by Secretary Cheney and they were proceeding at the rate of about 100,000 a year. When this Administration took office we did not change that rate of drawdown at all. It continued at the same rate as it's been under Secretary Cheney.

The decision to drop the forces--he was going from 2.1 to 1.6. We decided to take them down to 1.45. But we did not accelerate the drawdown, we just agreed to extend it longer. We haven't reached the time period... We're still at a force level larger than it was based on the Cheney plan. We're about 1.65 right now. So we have not yet reached the point where that argument, if it were valid, would even be operational.

So the first point is that we are at the same force level now as was projected by Secretary Cheney for this time when he was the Secretary. The second point is that we do plan to go beyond that point. We believe that this is compatible with not just the forces to fight a Desert Storm, but the capability of dealing with two major regional conflicts.

I want to be clear that we don't expect to fight two major regional conflicts. What we expect to have is a force sufficient so, if we get in one major regional conflict, we'll have enough reserve forces that no other country will be tempted to challenge us at that point--thinking we're too weak to deal with it.

Q: You always hear the phrase "almost" simultaneously, and I try to grasp what that means. Does that have a good definition? Rather than saying fighting simultaneously, "almost simultaneously" is a...

A: The situation that is envisioned there is that the immediate drain on resources in the conflict is on the lift resources, particularly the airlift. If you have conflicts that are several weeks apart, then you can shift the lift from one conflict to another. If they happen exactly simultaneously, then you have to choose between one or the other, or you have to split the lift in other ways.

The other thing it's referring to is we were not envisioning two countries orchestrating and coordinating an attack on us. What we were really trying to protect against was one country attacking and then the other country seizing the opportunity. We would assume that, in that case, it would take them a couple of weeks to get read to seize the opportunity properly.

Q: The new security strategy says that if efforts to prevent additional countries from acquiring chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them fail, "U.S. forces must be prepared to deter, prevent, and defend against their use." If a hostile or a potentially hostile nation attempts to develop nuclear weapons, would this country ever take preemptive action to destroy their nuclear capability as revealed under their act in order to prevent it from developing into a greater capability?

A: Let me choose my words carefully here.

Q: Incidentally, you can edit your remarks afterwards. Sometimes they don't come out quite as clearly as you would like.

A: We would not want to rule out the possibility for preemptive strike. I would not rule that out. When we looked at the crisis we were facing in North Korea, we did not rule out that option, and we publicly stated we did not rule it out. So I believe that the proliferator ought to understand that is a potential danger to them. But we would certainly not, while we wouldn't rule it out, we're also not going to telegraph that much either.

Q: General McPeak, Chief of Staff of the Air Force until October, has said that the Gulf War was the first time in history that a field army was defeated by an air power. While some disagree with the categorical nature of the statement, few deny that the Air Force did a pretty good job out there and have perhaps ushered in a new era of aerial warfare. I would appreciate your perspective on the role of air power in the nation's defense. That's kind of a big question. Perhaps more specifically, has the role of air power advanced so markedly as to merit a greater share of the defense budget? Are we going to rely on air power more than ever? And will this be exhibited in future budgets?

A: I think there have been enormous increases in the effectiveness of air power. I think General McPeak was referring to it. It was brought about by a decreased vulnerability through a combination of stealth and counter-measures and tactics. It was demonstrated in Desert Storm: we had an amazingly low loss in operation. It was brought about by a greatly enhanced intelligence which tells us where targets are and which targets to strike and when to strike them. Finally, it was brought about by the introduction of precision-guided munitions which lead to one target, one bomb. And they revolutionized not only the effectiveness of our ability to strike, but completely and dramatically changed the kind of logistics tail that's necessary to support air strikes because of the increased efficiency.

All of these things, I think, led--in the Gulf War--to McPeak's assertion that the Iraqi field army was devastated--certainly--if not fully defeated--by air power to be a correct statement. The air power by itself did not win the war, though. It took a joint operation to win the war. Therefore, while the air power had greatly

increased in effectiveness, it still requires the joint air/ground/sea operations to win wars. And that's what our forces are being built on, that's what our budget is being based on, and that's what our tactics and doctrine are being based on.

Q: So you don't foresee any enlargement in proportion to the other services of the Air Force's budget?

A: No, I don't. Specifically I would point out, though, that in many of these same advances in air power, they're being introduced in ground power as well. That is, the same improved intelligence, the same improved stealthiness, same emphasis on improved stealthiness, and certainly the same emphasis on precision-guided munitions. You can look at the ability of an M1 tank to hit a moving tank several miles away--that's also a revolutionary increase in capability.

Q: The scientific community has, in recent years, brought to our attention the possibility that an asteroid or a comet could collide with the earth, bringing unprecedented destruction. Recent photos of the Schumaker/Levy Comet colliding with Jupiter and releasing energy (inaudible), I think. Earthplanet-size marks--scars on Jupiter--are quite dramatic. While these are very rare events, the destructive potential is so great that some scientists think we should plan now to discover how to deal with diverting such bodies from colliding with the earth.

The Air Force has made information available to us (inaudible) satellite program, to assess the threat, but has no program to divert such a body if one were discovered to be on a collision course with the earth. Is this a threat that the DoD is prepared to handle, or is thinking about?

A: The DoD is not prepared to handle that threat. Particularly the DSP, I think, is not particularly a useful tool for detecting deep space--which is where, in order for any system to be useful--you have to detect it in very deep space.

Q: What they're using it for is looking down on earth, and they're seeing how many meteoroid strikes are occurring per a unit of time. So this gives them an enhancement...

A: A historical base.

Q: Right.

A: But in terms of detecting and taking counter-measures against an asteroid, we have no program for either of those. NASA has deep space surveillance programs which could be useful for the first part of that, for the detection. We are not working on a program that would have any real prospect of being able to put enough energy out into deep space that could deflect an asteroid from the earth.

Q: Does that mean that it really is not considered important enough to even begin thinking or rudimentary planning about such an intercept? If the state of the planet might be at stake, this is a national, a world problem...

A: I think it's quite appropriate to think about it. None of the thinking that I have heard of or seen so far gives me any confidence that we have an idea, a cogent idea about how to deal with the problem. If you take the example of the asteroid that hit Jupiter, the energy that would have to be required to deflect that would just be enormous. It's an absence of good ideas about how to get a toe-hold on the problem rather than a lack of concern about it.

Q: I attended a seminar at Los Alamos where the subject was the topic of discussion--originated by a congressional request of NASA and DOE and NASA had sponsored it. There were a number of papers discussing just what kind of intercept might be done, with what types of eccentricities of orbit. So there are people thinking in those terms.

A: It's quite clear that it's a subject with a lot of intellectual fascination, and a subject of obviously great importance. So if this intellectual fascination can lead to a concept which is worth pursuing, we would certainly be interested in doing that.

Q: Is that something that you would initiate an inquiry into at your level, saying, "Fellows, look into this?" Is it a defense problem of an unusual order? But it would have your...

A: Only if I had some reason to believe that a program would have any reasonable chance of having success.

Q: You have said that a major way you can help to ensure readiness is to change the way DoD buys equipment; in other words, to reform the defense acquisition process. This is from one of your speeches, you said that "It makes you feel a bit like Don Quixote sitting on his steed, galloping towards a windmill, not knowing whether he will be thrown off his horse or the windmill would change its way of turning."

I wanted to ask you for a kind of update on how the changing acquisition process is coming along. You mentioned there were some changes in the Senate that didn't give you all that you wanted, but something less than that. I sort of wanted to get your perspective on how that's coming along.

A: There are two aspects to the acquisition reform movement. One of them is changes in legislation, and the other is things we can do in the building that don't require legislative changes.

Let me talk about the first one, the legislative changes. There is a bill now in conference, the Acquisition Reform Bill. If it comes out of conference favorably--that is, it includes most of the features we want in it--this will give us the opportunity to make some very important improvements in our buying system. So relative to what I believed when I gave that talk, I'm much more optimistic now. It looks like we'll really get legislation which will, among other things, allow us to use commercial buying practices for two different categories of purchases. Small purchases and small in this case is defined as under $100,000. When you add up all the $100,000 purchases, that's a lot of money. Secondly, buying commercial products. We can now use, under this new provision, commercial buying practices in buying commercial products. Those two together will be a very substantial improvement.

The other thing which we hope will be in this bill is a pilot program which allows us to apply certain features of commercial buying practices to large complex weapon system procurements. The so-called pilot programs--we have a half a dozen or so identified. That is, to demonstrate that we can use commercial buying practices on even large, sophisticated programs.

So I'm hopeful at this stage. I'm optimistic at this stage that we'll get a significant piece of legislation and I'm hopeful that we will actually be able to implement those and reform the system so that we will knock the windmill down.

The other thing we're doing is reform process action teams which are changing in detail, step by step the way we apply military specifications, with the objective of within a year's time, having that turned over so that industrial specs become our standard and MilSpecs become the exception. Indeed, by that time, we will require program managers to get a waiver in order to use MilSpecs. That's been well advanced since the time that I gave that talk as well. I met with Acquisition Reform Assistant Secretary Colleen Preston and three Service Acquisition Secretaries who we didn't have at this time, just a week ago. They all have (inaudible) and are moving forward vigorously.

So I'm optimistic right now that we're going to make real progress in this area during this term.

Q: Has any number been put on the savings?

A: No. I've tried to get numbers for that, and I've sort of had to choose between not having a number or having a number that didn't have any real substance to it. So I've chosen not having a number rather than passing out numbers that I can't back up. It's very hard to really nail this down.

Q: It's probably (inaudible) the Congress would take that number and use it against you, chop your budget down.

A: Absolutely.

Q: This is an odd question, and again, it may be something you want to think more about afterwards, Edward (inaudible). Are you familiar with him?

A: Sure.

Q: ...Center for Strategic International Studies. He wrote in Foreign Affairs that, "The U.S. is declining to act the role of a great power because it's not willing to pay the price in casualties." The Gulf War was just (inaudible). And he implied that air power was used to a greater extent in order to reduce casualties. Has our fear of casualties really placed this type of constraint upon us?

A: I read the article, it was a good article. Edward is always a thoughtful person. He's very provocative with lots of ideas. To answer that question, I'd have to refer back to the long-winded answer I gave you to the first question, to talk about military strategy and divide it into three categories. The reason I think of it and tried to talk about those three categories, and in trying to deal with a question like that, you really have to look at those categories.

In that first category--vital national security interests--I don't think what Edward says applies. If we were to get in a war with Korea over their use of nuclear weapons or their invasion of South Korea, I think we are prepared... First of all, I think we are politically and psychologically prepared to stand up to the North Koreans. If they were to invade South Korea, we would fight back. Secondly, I think we have the military readiness and the military ability to soundly defeat them. That would involve many casualties, including American casualties. But I think when the American public sees vital national security interests at stake, they are prepared--psychologically prepared--for that. I gave you the three cases where I thought it applied.

Going down to the last case, humanitarian peacekeeping operations where the public sees us going over to help other people, and then sees our people being killed by the people we're trying to help, that's very hard to take. You look at the Somalia situation. As far as the U.S. public was concerned, we were in there in a humanitarian operation and trying to help the Somali people. Therefore they reacted particularly negatively to that, for that reason.

So in that case, no, I don't think we are prepared to take casualties. When I sent our forces to Rwanda, I went over and met with the commanding officer, and said, "your number one task is to provide for the security of your forces. Don't take any chances in that regard." That doesn't mean you can't have any casualties,

because any operation like that has certain risks involved. But we're going to be very careful with what steps we can take to minimize that casualty.

When you get to the intermediate situation, it's a hard one. That's the case where a national security interest is at stake; we're using coercive diplomacy which includes the threat of war; we may actually engage in a military operation like a NATO airstrike against the Serbs. There's a risk that one of our planes can be shot down. Those are untested waters. We don't know how the public will react to that.

Q: It's very difficult. You're trying to, in a sense, start a war in order to prevent the bigger one. That's the kind of...

A: Our primary security objective in Bosnia today is preventing the spread of a wider war there. The military action we take is for that purpose. A small investment early on can save a bigger cost later on. A small cost early on can prevent a bigger cost later on.

So in the first case, yes. I think we're prepared to be a great power and act like a great power. In the humanitarian case, we need to structure that so we aren't faced with that kind of a risk or challenge of casualties. The intermediate case is untested waters. We will find out as time goes on--whether the American public has the stomach to stand the kind of coercive diplomacy we're using in Bosnia today.

Q: In Haiti, there's a lot of opposition to making an invasion there -- opposition from the Hill. How do you make a decision there? Without political support, it's a tough call.

A: The opposition is in several different categories. One aspect of it simply questions whether it is in our national interest. Most of the negative comments about Haiti are, "Don't get involved with them at all. They are not a national interest to the United States."

I've contended, and the President has contended, of course, that it is in our national interest. It's not a vital national interest. It does not threaten the survival of the United States, but we do have a national interest in promoting (inaudible), preventing the flow of refugees. Those two interests alone certainly warrant the coercive diplomacy we use there today. They don't warrant a full-scale war. Whether they may warrant an action designed to throw out the regime is a matter of debate right now.

Q: Thank you so much, Mr. Secretary.

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